

## Forum For the Future Fathers-In-Law by PureShores

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**Summary:**

Ted Wheeler's life is built on a solid foundation of routine. Until he meets his son's new girlfriend and learns what she can do. His perception of the world turns upside down. Mike and El recruit Hopper to smooth things over.

## Forum For the Future Fathers-In-Law

### Author's Note:

So it's been a while since I've written anything. I'm not really sure how well this will be received. It's kind of an attempt to humanize ST's most useless character, Ted Wheeler, through the magic of Mileven. I don't think he's a bad guy really, just a bored suburbanite whose life didn't work out the way he planned it.

I hope you enjoy

The first time he held his newborn son, Ted Wheeler saw a world full of possibilities. NFL quarterback. Wrestler. Boxer. Champion ball player. A son to bring glory to the Wheelers of Hawkins. A son to be proud of.

Since he'd proposed to Karen on the last day of college, the objective had been simple: to build the kind of family, the kind of life that people coveted. The doting wife, the perfect children, the white picket fence, the big house in the cul-de-sac. That, to Ted Wheeler, was the measure of a successful man.

Four-year old Nancy, with the baby blue eyes and the angelic smile, was already well on her way to being the perfect daughter. She loved to read, consumed books by the fistful. Everyone always said what a beautiful, clever, well-behaved little girl she was, and he was proud.

And here, finally, was the last piece of the puzzle. A son, who he could take to football games and baseball games, and brag about at the office. A kid who would achieve greatness, the kind where people raised their eyebrows at you when they found out he was your kid, because they were so impressed. They would clamour to know his secrets, how he managed to produce such an extraordinary son.

"I taught him everything he knows," he would tell them, a twinkle in his eye, as though he were joking, even if he wasn't.

Fame. Fortune. Glory. All the things he'd always wanted as a kid, but had never been able to get. It was so close he could taste it.

But life had other plans. Things didn't work out the way he'd hoped. Try as he might to uncover some hidden athletic prowess in his son, there was apparently none to be had. Mike *hated* sports. Of all kinds. He couldn't catch a football to save his life; Nancy could pitch a baseball with far more accuracy than he could. At parent-teacher night, Mike's gym teacher had made a point of telling them that he was one of the most uncoordinated kids he'd ever taught. But Ted persisted. Mike showed no interest at all in basketball, hockey, wrestling, track, or anything else his father tried to introduce him to. Mike was happier when he was off with his friends, lurking in the basement making up fairytales or whatever the hell they did down there all day.

By the time his son was in the fifth grade, Ted Wheeler had grudgingly accepted the truth; Mike was never going to achieve sporting glory. No Stanley Cup or SuperBowl ring would ever adorn the Wheeler's mantelpiece. No Ted Wheeler, father of a young American hero. Just Ted Wheeler. Father. Husband. White-collar, middle management. Just another everyday, two a penny, working schmuck.

That was about the time he stopped caring about things. It was easier that way. Expect nothing and either be correct or pleasantly surprised. No disappointment. No failure.

Life went on. He got promoted. They renovated the kitchen. Holly came along. Nancy spent all her time in her bedroom. Mike spent all his time in the basement, playing games with his friends, and their constant chatter seemed to permeate every corner of the house.

Then Will Byers went missing, and everything changed.

One minute he was gone, the next he was back, and their house had been swarmed with government types asking about a girl with a shaved head. Where was she? Were they hiding her? And so on.

Mike had been so angry. Squaring up to those powerful people without an ounce of fear, declaring point blank that he didn't know

where she was, and wouldn't tell them if he did. He meant it, too. Ted could see it in his eyes.

Then Mike seemed to lose his focus. He kept peering out the window at what seemed to be nothing. But it was enough to make them all get up and rush out the door, fanning out to do a sweeping search of the area looking for...God only knew what. This girl, surely she wasn't here.

Mike watched them silently, fearfully. Seemed a little relieved when they came back empty-handed.

The people kept questioning him for close to an hour. For the life of him, Ted couldn't understand why they were so interested in Mike. He was just an ordinary kid. He tried to tell them so, but they kept on harassing him. Clearly, as it went on, Mike was getting more and more distressed, but he never wavered, just kept repeating himself over and over, until finally, he'd simply stood up and left the room.

That was when Karen asked them to leave.

The door shutting behind them was echoed by the slam of Mike's bedroom door upstairs. That was pretty much the last they saw of their son for the next year. Whoever the disrespectful, angry little punk was that they had to deal with after that, sure as hell wasn't Michael Wheeler.

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Over a year has passed since that night. A lot has changed. He and Karen feel further apart than ever. He barely claps eyes on his eldest children these days, doesn't know where they go, or what they do. Even when they are in the house, they're never alone. Nancy is rarely seen without Jonathan Byers by her side (what had happened to other one, with the hair?) As for Mike, he is still surrounded by his small army of friends, which has now grown by two.

Both *girls*, he finds out when he spots them all in the kitchen one afternoon, clamouring for snacks. A redhead, and one with brown curls. Neither have a shaved head so they can't be Mike's mystery girl

from last year, which is a relief. Ted never once saw her, but she sure as hell managed to bring a lot of trouble down on their heads.

Mike hands a cookie to Brown Curls, who shoots him a glowing smile. Ted's been in a fairly unsatisfying marriage for a long time now, but he knows what that look means. She's clearly sweet on him.

Frankly, he didn't think Mike had it in him. He's strangely proud.

He tells Mike so, at dinner that night. Mike rolls his eyes. Calls him an asshole. Karen sends him to his room.

Ted doesn't bother being annoyed at his son's belligerence; it's par for the course these days. "Who's the girl?" he asks his wife instead.

Karen is clearing the dishes from the table and doesn't so much as spare him a glance.

"She's the Chief's girl." Okay, that makes sense. At least it explains why in tiny Hawkins, he's never seen her before. And to be honest, he doesn't think anyone's surprised that their philandering police chief has produced a love child. He's slept his way through most of Hawkins' young, single population, it makes sense he'd slip up somewhere. It's a numbers game, after all.

"And how does Mike know her?" As far as he knows, his son has never had a girl as a friend before. Now, he apparently has two.

His wife shrugs, with difficulty, as her arms are laden with plates. "Talk to your son once in a while," she says. "And maybe you might know."

Ted takes that to mean that she doesn't know either. She's spending more and more time out of the house these days, for 'book club' and 'sewing circle' and whatever other ways she and her friends in the neighbourhood label their get-togethers. Personally, he thinks gossip and margaritas are more the order of the day than books and needlepoint, based on the smell that hangs around his wife when she comes home sometimes, but it's not his place to pry. He works all day. She has to entertain herself somehow.

He supposes neither of them will be in the running for Parent of the

Year.

He really does mean to talk to his son about his new girlfriend. Truly. But then he gets busy, and the day passes into the next one, and then the next, until before he knows it, a whole week has passed. Oh well, he tells himself, Mike's a smart kid. And the girl is a little slip of a thing that looks like she could blow away in a strong gust of wind. How much trouble could she be?

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It's Saturday afternoon. Karen has been at him all week to mow the lawn. There's a game on, and he'd much rather watch that, but grudgingly goes to the backyard to do her bidding. Happy wife, happy life, after all.

As he exits the back door, he hears voices up near the shed where they keep the garden tools. He'd know his son's voice anywhere, but the other is unfamiliar. Soft, feminine, curving around the words very precisely as though it fears being misunderstood.

"That one looks like a cat."

It's Mike's girl. She is a constant presence in their home, a near-permanent fixture at Mike's side, but it occurs to Ted now that he's never actually heard her speak before. She tends to talk through Mike, or simply gesture to things she wants.

"Where? There? Yeah, it kind of does," His son's voice is warm, with a loving caress that seems so obvious now that Ted wonders why he hasn't noticed it before.

"I like cats."

"I know." Accompanied by a low chuckle.

Ted peers around the side of the shed to spot the two of them lying on their backs on the grass, gazing up at the sky. They're holding hands, he notices. Two empty Coke cans and a half-finished packet of potato chips are lying beside them.

They look peaceful. Almost idyllic. The sight gives him an unexpected pang. He doesn't remember the last time he was so carefree. Many years ago.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"What are clouds made of?"

Ted's a little surprised by the question. Surely that's something they cover in school. But as Mike patiently explains to her about water vapour and rising air she hangs onto his every word, like he's explaining some unknown secret of the universe, rather than a process that could be found in any old science textbook.

"You know a lot of things," the girl notes, when Mike finishes the science lesson, and he chuckles.

"Not really. Anyway you're gonna be way smarter than me, or any of the guys by the time Nancy's finished with you."

Now that he says it, Ted has a dim memory of Karen mentioning Nancy doing some tutoring now. He'd thought nothing of it at the time.

"Wish you could teach me. I like the way *you* explain things."

Mike squeezes her hand. "And I like teaching you. But don't' worry, you can still ask me questions whenever you want."

She beams at him. "Good. I like you the best. And not just for that."

Mike smiles back, they both chuckle, and she nudges his shoulder with hers.

Ted senses it's time to break up this little love-in. Nobody would ever accuse him of being perceptive, or observant, but when they're shoving it right in his face, what choice does he have? Is this what they're doing all the time in the basement, alone?

Does Karen know about this?

He clears his throat, loudly.

They both jump up with a start, looking around wildly. When his son's gaze lands on him, he sees the momentary relief quickly give way to the annoyance and disdain he always gets from Mike these days. The girl however, is eyeing him with apprehension, almost fear. She reminds Ted of a cornered animal.

"It's okay," Mike reassures her, gently. "It's just my dad."

His soft tone belies the iron grip he now seems to have on her hand, if the whiteness of his knuckles is any indication. The sight makes Ted a little sad. His son, his own flesh and blood should not be so tense any time he sets eyes on him. Where have they gone wrong?

"Bad?" whispers the girl, anxiously.

"No," says Mike. "Not like that, anyway."

"Aren't you going to introduce me, son?" Ted gestures to the girl, who is still studying him, carefully. "What's your name?" he asks and she exchanges a glance with Mike briefly, before answering in the softest voice he's ever heard.

"I'm El."

"And where did you come from?" he asks, curiously.

Again, her eyes flick to Mike's, as though she's hoping he will answer for her. For the life of him, Ted can't figure out why she's so skittish. It's a simple enough question.

Mike obliges her.

"Leave her alone," he snaps at Ted. "What are you even doing out here anyway?"

"This is my house, son, and my yard." He pauses for a moment to let the significance of that sink in. If he instils just one value in his son, he wants it to be respect for authority figures and landowners. Good, solid values are what make their country great.



Mike is apparently unmoved. He scoffs. “Mom finally forced you to mow the lawn you’ve been promising to do for a month?”

Damn. Mike’s got him, and he knows it. Smirks. He sure has developed a smart mouth, this past year. Ted doesn’t care for it. In fact, both of his elder children are getting to be too clever for their own good.

“We’ll get out of your way then,” he says, mock bowing, and tugging the girl’s hand to lead her away. “Isn’t there a game on right now, too? What a shame.”

“Watch it,” Ted snaps. He’d have gotten a swift clip over the ear if he’d ever dared speak to his father like that, growing up. Mike’s got a hide. His son’s smirk turns to a scowl. The girl looks fearfully between them, as though expecting them to come to blows. She shifts a little, as if trying to put herself between them, and he almost wants to laugh. She’s got guts; he’ll give her that. But she’s tiny. And skinny. What could she possibly do?

“Come help me get the mower out,” he commands his son. “Make yourself useful for once.”

“You’re one to talk,” comes the immediate rejoinder. “I’m surprised your ass isn’t welded to that La-Z-Boy permanently, yet.”

The toolshed is dark, and dusty. The lightbulb blew out long ago and nobody’s bothered to replace it. The lawnmower is buried at the very back, under boxes of Christmas decorations, old school reports, broken, disused furniture that nobody’s bothered to throw away, and God only knows what else. They’ve thrown open the door to let in some light as they lug things aside to make room to extract the mower.

El is hovering just outside the door. She followed them over, peering inside curiously, but refuses to cross the threshold. He’s not sure whether it’s the darkness or the confined space that’s throwing her, but it seems she doesn’t dare go another step.

Mike carries out Ted’s old boxing gloves and dumps them on the grass. Does the same to a carton of Ted and Karen’s high school

yearbooks. Ted bites back the urge to scold him. There's important stuff in those books.

A boxful of Ted's old college memorabilia receives the same treatment, and lands unceremoniously on the ground with a thud. He can't help himself this time.

"Be more careful," he chastises his son.

"With all your crap from the old glory days? They're over, Dad. Let it go."

"How would you feel if I threw your old science fair projects around like that?"

That gives Mike pause. Ted's never really understood the whole science fair thing, but he knows that his son works hard on them, and is proud of them. They're important to him.

"Right," he says, setting down the boxes with a little more care. "Sorry."

It's not a heartfelt, tearful apology, but Ted will take it. Besides he doesn't know what to do with heartfelt and tearful anyway. That's Karen's department.

They shift things for a few minutes before they've finally cleared enough space to move the mower. As Ted rolls it backwards, the handle knocks against the shelf, dislodging a few paint cans. They're still full, he remembers, from that time he was going to repaint the kitchen but just never got around to it. Mike is standing directly in the line of fire, helping to push the mower backwards and can't move away in time as they hurtle towards him.

"Mike!" A frantic shriek rings out from the doorway.

To Ted's utter astonishment, the paint cans freeze in mid-air, just before they hit his son in the head.

He can't be seeing what he thinks he's seeing. It just isn't possible. He closes his eyes quickly and then opens them again.

They're still there. It's like somebody has pressed the pause button on *time*. He'd like to think he's imagining it, but he's never had much of an imagination.

He's so busy goggling at the frozen cans; he doesn't notice that El and Mike don't look the slightest bit surprised. Mike's a little shocked, because it always catches him off-guard when she uses her powers. He gets so wrapped up in *her*, that he tends to forget about what she can do, until it happens. As for El, she's just pleased she reacted in time. She'd been staring up at the clouds again when she heard the mower hit the shelf. She only had a split second to intervene.

It was close, but she managed it. Mike is safe. That's all she cares about. She smiles at him.

He smiles back. Reality hits them both at the same moment with the force of a speeding train. They're not alone. Mike's dad is here. And saw everything.

The cat's out of the bag.

She uses her powers to fling the cans aside. They hit the wall with a clatter, and fall to the ground. The lids stay on because she's holding them there telekinetically.

Before Ted's eyes, the cans suddenly reanimate and go hurtling toward the wall. He follows their progress in bewilderment, and then turns to his son.

"What the hell is going on here?"

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Ten minutes later, he's in his favourite La-Z-Boy. A can of beer has been pressed into his hand, but he's not drinking it. He hasn't even opened it. He can't stop seeing the floating paint cans.

He knows what he saw, but he doesn't believe it. *Can't* believe it. It just isn't possible.

Karen, Holly and Nancy are out, thank Christ.

El is on the phone, calling Hopper. They need backup. They have to tell Mike's dad the story, now. Or at least part of it. And convince him not to tell anyone else.

Hopper's not pleased. Another person in the know means another way for the lab people to get to her. He scolds her for being so careless.

She won't apologize. She did it to keep Mike from harm. So he'd be safe. She'll *never* be sorry about keeping him safe.

Mike's on the couch, watching his dad trying to process what he's seen. He can almost see the struggle that must be going on in his mind, trying to comprehend. His dad is as straight and narrow as they come. He likes his beer cold; he likes his chairs comfortable and his meals home-cooked. He likes to go to sleep at around the same time every night and get up around the same time every morning. He likes dinner to be on the table when he gets home from work, and breakfast to be on the table when he gets up in the morning. He likes routine.

Something as amazing and surprising as El is going to take a while to get his head around. And once they've done that, they need to find a way to convince him to keep his mouth shut about her. If he talks, if he puts El at risk, if she's taken away from him *again*, Mike will never, ever forgive him.

That's why they're bringing in Hopper. Hopper is a man's man. He has a position of power. He works for the government, all things Mike's dad respects. He'll listen to him.

"Did you know about this?" his father asks, presently. "Has this happened before?"

"Yes."

"Here? In the house?"

That's an odd question, Mike thinks. But he answers it anyway.

“Yes.”

“So last year, when she was living here, she was doing...that? And we never knew about it?”

Mike's not sure what exactly his father is getting at with this line of questioning. But he humours him all the same. If he's talking, it means he's processing. That's good.

“It's not like a magic show,” he says. “She doesn't use them all the time. Only when she has to.”

Ted barely hears the answer. He's imagining it last year. Himself, sitting in front of the TV, eating dinner, totally unaware that just downstairs someone was moving things around *with her mind*. This isn't reality. This isn't the world as he knows it. This is science fiction come to life. In his own home. And he had *no* idea.

Then something registers. She is the ‘Russian spy.’ She has to be. Why else would that many government agents be so intent on finding one little girl? But if she can do *that*, no wonder they're on her trail.

What if it's true? What if she *is* a spy? What if she's been using Mike all this time for information to pass to the other side? Have they committed treason? Will they be arrested? Killed?

“Not a spy.”

Her soft voice makes him jump a mile. She moved so silently, he didn't even hear her approach him. She's studying him with solemn, dark eyes, as though she knows exactly what he's thinking.

And then he realises. He never said the spy stuff out loud. She responded to his thoughts. She does know what he's thinking. He knows it.

This girl is less than half his size. Probably weighs about seventy pounds soaking wet.

He's *terrified* of her.

She takes another step forward, and he shrinks back. He sees that

she's hurt by his reaction. She steps back quickly, casts an unreadable look at his son.

Mike's already moving: he's at her side in an instant. Gathers her into his arms and shoots Ted a dirty look over her shoulder.

"Nice one, Dad," he says, scornfully. "She wasn't going to hurt you."

"How do you know?" There's probably no limit to what this girl can do. It's a legitimate question.

In Mike's arms, the girl lets out a noise that's somewhere between a gasp and a sob. Mike whispers something to her that Ted can't hear, then turns his eyes to him. They're full of fury.

"Because I know *her*," he says. "She's good and kind, and *amazing*."

He tries to reason with his son. "Mike, we're out of our depth here. Surely there's someone we can call..."

The police. The government. The army. The newspapers. NASA. *Anyone*.

"If you put her in danger, I'll never speak to you again. And if she has to leave because of you...." Mike trails off as she squeezes him tighter, as though the mere mention of her leaving is too much to bear.

Ted can guess the gist of where that sentence was going anyway. Nowhere good, that's for sure.

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Outside, the metallic thud of a vehicle door slamming gets their attention. As the person approaches, they can hear heavy footfalls, and garbled radio chatter coming through the door. It's Hopper.

He enters the house without knocking. They're expecting him after all. He finds them all in the front room. Ted Wheeler looks as though

he's been hit over the head with a sledgehammer. Mike is glaring at his father, holding Eleven in his arms. And Eleven is clinging to him, head buried in the crook of his neck.

Hopper feels his heart twist in his chest. God, how he hates it when she cries.

"Hey kid," he greets her, and she pokes her head out of the safe haven of Mike for a moment to meet his eyes. Her eyes are a little red, and he can see tear tracks on her cheeks.

"Chief," Mike greets him, dully. Ted Wheeler says nothing. Hopper notices he's leaning back in the chair as far away from Eleven as he can get. No wonder she's upset. There's nothing she hates more than feeling like she's abnormal. Anger on her behalf rises up inside him. He's never liked Ted Wheeler, and frankly it astounds him sometimes that he and Mike are related, much less father and son. They couldn't be more different.

With a big effort, he tamps down the fatherly protectiveness. Ted's just had a hell of a shock. It's not all his fault. Hopper, Joyce, Mike and the others consider El's powers a part of her now, but to a guy like Ted this is groundbreaking.

He shoos the kids downstairs to the basement. He knows Mike will take good care of her. He'll calm her down, and she'll be smiling again in no time. She always does when he's around.

He sees Ted's got a beer in his hand. That seems like an excellent idea, so he gets one for himself from the fridge and returns to sit on the couch. He cracks it open.

"All right Wheeler, here's the deal. Listen up, keep your mouth shut, and save all questions till the end. I'm only going to say all this once."

He tells Ted Wheeler, if not the whole story, then at least the edited highlights. He leaves out the monsters and the dimension-hopping, but he tells him about how Eleven grew up, how she helped to save Will. That she has saved all of their lives, more than once. That she's a hero.

But he also tells him that she's just an ordinary kid. That she loves Eggos. She likes to watch TV, and ride bikes with the boys. She likes to sleep in late, loves music, and hates eating her vegetables. That she's *human*.

She's not a science experiment. She's certainly no spy. And most importantly of all, *she's his kid*.

Ted's a father, after all. Sure, he's not the hands-on type but that doesn't mean he doesn't care. He should understand that.

Ted listens without arguing, but Hopper can tell he's still freaked out by it all. There's an uncomfortable moment when Nancy's name comes up, and he realises that Ted never knew that she was involved too. Hopper finds he even feels for the guy a little. Two of his kids have got secret double lives he never suspected. That's got to be a kick in the guts.

Ted is silent for a while. Then he seems to come to some sort of conclusion. Meets Hopper's eyes with determination.

"Okay, I'll keep your secret. But I don't want this girl in my house anymore," he says, firmly. "And I want her to stay away from my son."

Hopper realises he's serious, but still has to work hard to bite back a laugh. It will take a much stronger force than Ted Wheeler's disapproval to separate Mike and Eleven now they've found each other again.

He still doesn't think Mike's fully forgiven *him* for keeping them apart. And he's not convinced he ever will.

"Look, I can't tell you what you can and can't do in your own house, Ted," he says. "But I can tell you this much. They'll find each other whether you like it or not."

It's downright weird sometimes. He's seen it happen. It's like they can sense each other's thoughts, no matter how far apart they are. And he'll never forget El, locked in her room every night for a year, visiting Mike in her mind because she missed him so much. Pleading



with him to be allowed to see him.

Sometimes, he thinks that's part of the reason her powers got so much stronger this past year. Out of sheer necessity, and desperation.

It took nothing less than lab psychos with guns and monsters from another dimension to keep them apart. And even that only lasted for a while.

Hopper agrees that they don't need to be together every waking minute of every day. But keeping them from each other permanently?

Ted Wheeler has no chance.

**Author's Note:**

I'd like to hear your thoughts, if you have any.  
Thanks for reading!